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Victory Over Blindness—The Story of St. Dunstan's

THE AUTHOR, WHO LOST HIS SIGHT SOME YEARS AGO, AND WHO HAS SINCE DEVOTED HIMSELF TO WORK FOR THE BLIND, TELLS OF THE WONDERFUL THINGS THAT HAVE BEEN DONE FOR THE BLINDED SOLDIERS OF THE BRITISH ARMY

By Sir Arthur Pearson

THE editor has asked me to write for the readers of MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE an account of the work of St. Dunstan's—that is, of the training and progress of the soldiers of the British imperial forces who lost their sight in the great war.

St. Dunstan's is the London residence of Mr. Otto H. Kahn, of New York. At the outset of the war he and Mrs. Kahn, with the utmost generosity, placed this house, in Regent's Park, with its magnificent grounds, at my disposal as a hostel for the blinded soldiers. It became the official training-center not only for the men of our own army, but for the Canadians, the South Africans, the Australians, and the New Zealanders. In this way practically without exception all of them who were blinded came under my care.

Before the outbreak of the war failing

A DANCE ON THE LAWN AT ST. DUNSTAN'S—DANCING IS ONE OF THE FAVORITE RECREATIONS OF THE BLINDED SOLDIERS

sight had compelled me to relinquish my active work as a newspaper proprietor, and I was already devoting a great deal of my time to problems connected with the welfare of our blind civilian population. I had the conviction that the usual attitude toward the blind was mistaken—so much talk of pity, of their affliction; so many things said and done to make them feel a people apart.

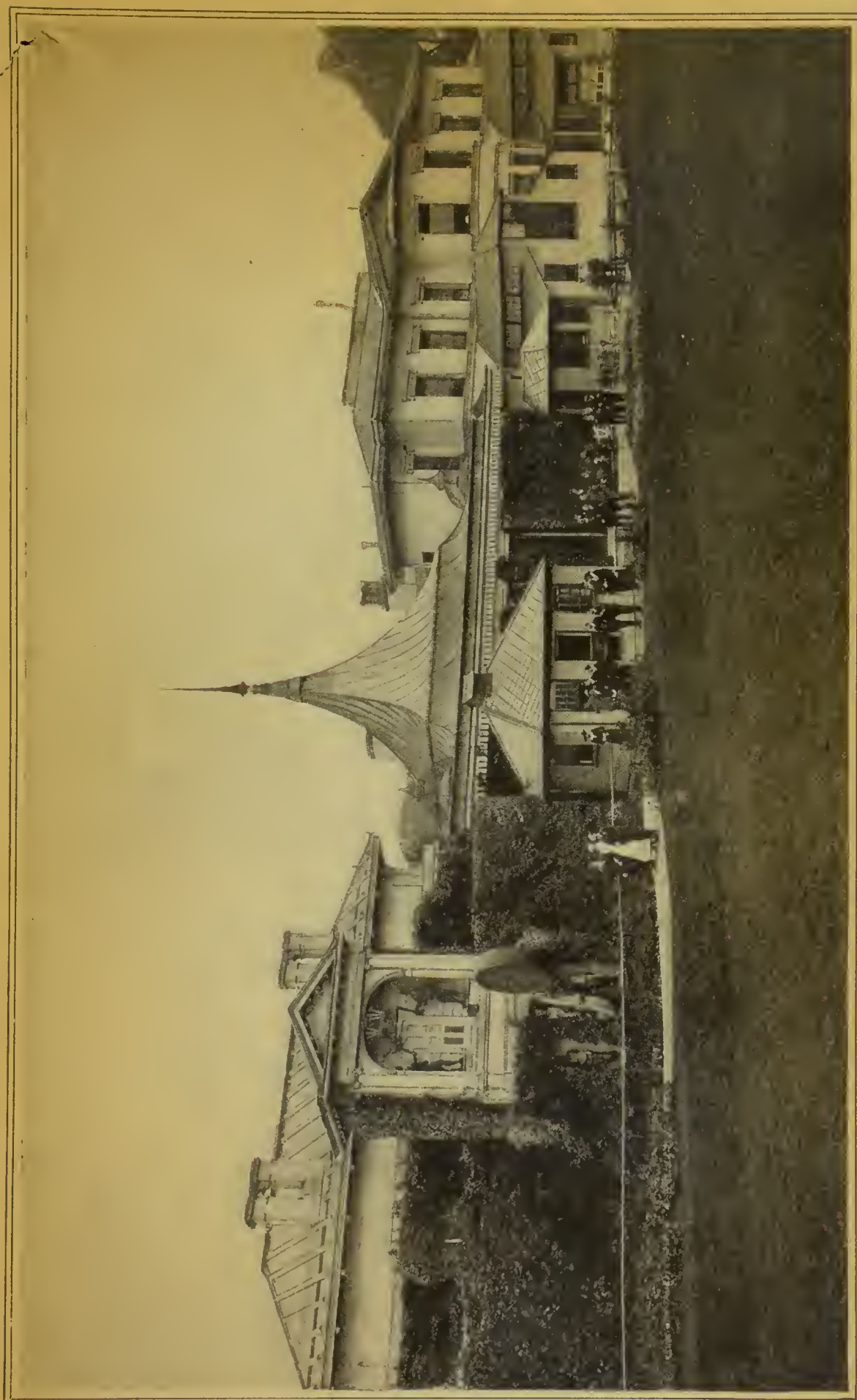
SIR ARTHUR PEARSON, FORMERLY A LEADING PUBLISHER IN LONDON, WHO HAS DEVOTED HIMSELF TO WORK FOR THE BLIND SINCE HIS OWN SIGHT FAILED SOME YEARS AGO

I went to see in hospital the first blinded soldier to be brought back from the front, and it was then I formed the plans which were soon to be carried out at St. Dunstan's. The central idea was that blindness should be regarded only as a handicap; that the blinded men should be encouraged to forget what they couldn't do, and to be swiftly interested in what they could do; that they should feel themselves still in close touch with the ordinary interests of life; that they should be treated and should bear themselves as nearly as might be like normal people.

Nearly two thousand men of the British imperial forces were actually blinded in the war. Of these the greater proportion have been set up in the world as workers, able to earn their own living, many of them more successfully than before they lost their sight. The remainder — very many of whom were delayed in their progress by lengthy periods in hospital, or by ill-health after they were discharged—are still under training, and are rapidly gaining the same proficiency. They are happy because they are proud of their accomplishments, and of their exceptional ability in the art of seeing without sight.

To help the blinded soldiers over the trying period of reeducation there gathered at St. Dunstan's a devoted band of workers—a certain number of men, and a little army of women. The hostel quickly became one of the busiest places in London, and one of the most cheerful. Yes, these men, living and working in darkness, gave always an amazing example of courage. They enjoyed their work and their play, entered into all the entertainments provided, and found pleasure in each step they made toward the conquest of their handicap.

It was arranged that as far as possible all the blinded men should be brought to one hospital in London. There I, or one of the blinded officers—Captain Ian Fraser, of whom I shall say more later, acting as my deputy—visited them. We sought that from the very first they should be inspired with the thought that in spite of



ST. DUNSTAN'S, THE LONDON RESIDENCE OF OTTO H. KAHN, OF NEW YORK, WHICH MR. KAHN PLACED AT THE DISPOSAL OF SIR ARTHUR PEARSON AS A HOSTEL FOR BLINDED SOLDIERS—SINCE THIS PHOTOGRAPH WAS TAKEN TEMPORARY BUILDINGS HAVE BEEN ERECTED ON THE LAWN IN FRONT OF THE HOUSE

their blindness there still lay before them all the possibilities of a future full of interest and activity.

To each man in hospital we gave a watch specially made for the blind, with dots in the place of numerals, and with strong hands made to be felt by the fingers. It was surprising to notice how greatly they were encouraged by finding that they could tell the time by touch. From this they turned with interest to their first lessons in netting and in mastering the Braille alphabet. Thus instruction began while the men were still in the hospital wards, and those who were able to go out were brought once a week to St. Dunstan's to discover for themselves the progress that other blind men were making.

It was a trying period for the blinded soldiers when they first left hospital, conscious of their helplessness in a world of darkness. I had a talk with each new arrival at St. Dunstan's, discussing with him plans for his future. Perhaps because I was blind myself, perhaps because we started with the assumption that blindness was only a handicap, and jumped to the consideration of a successful career in the future, the response was usually immediate. Once these brave lads made up their minds to get all they could out of life in spite of the loss of sight, they set to work with a determination and interest which overcame all obstacles.

BLIND INMATES OF ST. DUNSTAN'S ROWING ON THE LAKE IN REGENT'S PARK, LONDON

HOW A BLIND MAN CAN FIND HIS WAY

Nothing was more important, at first, than to gain confidence in the art of finding one's way about in the dark. Through the carpeted halls of St. Dunstan's ran linoleum paths as a guide for the men. There were hand-rails along the paths in the garden; boards set in the gravel gave warning of steps. It was not long before the men would venture out alone in the park, and in the course of time they would find their way along the near-by streets.

During the war the French experimented with dogs as guides for their blinded soldiers, but this was not successful. My theory was always that the more a blind man relied on himself, the better. I discouraged the use of heavy walking-sticks and the practise of tapping on the ground, or shuffling the feet. A light stick may serve a useful purpose—for instance, to keep in touch with a wall or the edge of the curb; or it may be carried slightly in front of the blind pedestrian, the point just above the ground. But the blinded soldiers soon developed the sense of direction and of their approach to an obstacle.

The nerves of the face give warning of many impending dangers; sounds gain meaning from constant attention, and a man seeking a special shop, for instance, may often recognize it by the characteristic smell of the goods displayed. The men grew independent in getting about; but there was never any lack of willing guides, or of the companionship which makes walks abroad for a blind man a real pleasure.

Within a familiar building the difficulties of free movement are soon overcome. It is very important, of course, that every article of furniture should have its place, and should not be moved without warning. A loud-ticking clock, a board that creaks, in winter the crackling of a fire in the grate —such things as these help a blinded man to walk about a room with confidence. Knowing the whereabouts of a chair or a sofa, he makes sure of the position of the seat by a touch of the leg, without groping. Stairs offer no difficulty. Such, however, is the general impression of the helplessness of blind people that visitors to St. Dunstan's often expressed surprise to hear that the men dressed and shaved themselves, and even to find that they did not need help in eating their food.

In getting about and in meeting many strangers the blinded soldiers quickly found the value of visualizing—forming mental pictures of their surroundings, and of those about them. By means of their other senses they came by degrees to see in a new way.

HANDICRAFTS FOR THE BLIND

While this general sense of self-reliance was developing, the men were already busy in the class-rooms and workshops of St. Dunstan's. Our hours of work are short, because everything that a blind man does involves exceptional concentration. In the various departments of the workshops there are sighted overseers, but the instructors are themselves blind. Being experts in the particular trade being taught, they can best understand the needs and difficulties of the blinded soldiers.

Just as the blinded man has to learn to walk in the dark, so he has to learn again to read and write and to work with his hands.

In the Braille room each man has his separate instructor. Sitting at a little table —in summer often brought out under the shade of a tree on the lawn—he studies the

THE ENTRANCE GATES OF ST. DUNSTAN'S

A GRADUATE OF ST. DUNSTAN'S SELLING PICTURES WHICH HE HAS FRAMED WITH HIS OWN HANDS

SAMPLES OF WORK DONE IN THE MAT-MAKING AND BASKET-WEAVING SHOPS AT ST. DUNSTAN'S

complicated system of dot signs which form the alphabet that the fingers can most easily learn to read. He learns to write by punching the dots with a stylo, or by the use of a Braille writing-machine.

A later stage, taken up by those who are going in for a business career, is the mastery of Braille shorthand. This is a highly concentrated system of Braille, and is taken down on a clever little machine through which runs a paper ribbon from a reel. It is operated by seven keys, and the practised blind stenographer can keep pace with the ordinary speed of a business man. In fact, we guarantee that every blind shorthand-writer who leaves St. Dunstan's is capable of a speed of at least one hundred words a minute.

To transcribe the notes, the long paper strip is passed through a groove attached to a typewriter, and in this way can be read by the finger-tips. The transcription of these blind operators on a typewriter is perfect. Blind typists do not make mistakes, because they cannot afford to do so.

Instruction in typewriting is given to every blinded soldier, since the handwriting of those who cannot see quickly deteriorates. For this reason a typewriter is presented to each man when he leaves St. Dunstan's. Correspondence in Braille, of course, is possible only between those who understand the system.

The expert typist and shorthand-writer is the man best equipped to study telephone-operating. That is another occupation which many of the blinded soldiers have taken up with success. They learn to preside with quite wonderful dexterity over a drop-shutter switchboard, taking down messages, when necessary, in shorthand, and copying them out on their typewriters. As a rule, the memory of the blind for names and numbers becomes remarkably accurate.

A BLIND STUDENT AT ST. DUNSTAN'S TAKING DICTATION ON A BRAILLE SHORTHAND MACHINE

Among the more unusual pursuits which are taught at St. Dunstan's are massage and poultry-farming. Visitors are always immensely interested in our country-life section, in seeing the blind men distinguish the different breeds of birds by feeling them with their knowing hands, attend to the incubators, and recognize the different kinds of food by touch or smell. They also learn

BLIND WORKERS IN THE NET-SHOP AT ST. DUNSTAN'S

rough carpentry, making frames for chicken-runs, and coops. Practical instruction and lectures are given by experts at St. Dunstan's, and we have a large poultry-farm in the country, where the men go to finish their course.

The practise of massage has proved an ideal occupation for many of the blinded soldiers. Some of the early comers to St. Dunstan's were doing invaluable work in the military hospitals long before the war was over. The examinations insisted on by the Incorporated Society of Trained Masseurs are very stiff. Besides the requisite degree of manual skill, an extensive knowledge of anatomy, physiology, and pathology is required; but our soldiers studied and triumphed. Quite early in the history of St. Dunstan's a Canadian, who before the war had been a clerk on the Canadian Pacific Railway, passed in these difficult examinations second among three hundred and twenty-six competitors from all parts of the United Kingdom. Recently this wonderful record was beaten by an English boy, who had had no previous scientific or special education, and who triumphantly emerged first from a crowd of three hundred and eight contestants. In each case the only blind competitors were a few comrades from St. Dunstan's.

These results have aroused the utmost surprise and admiration in medical circles, and have done much to lead to the remarkable financial success which has attended the work of our blind masseurs, both in the home-land and in our far-distant colonies.

At St. Dunstan's you pass from the studious quiet of the massage class-rooms to the stirring atmosphere of the workshops. During the war the grounds of Mr. Kahn's house became covered with wooden buildings. A regular township sprang up—including chapels, offices, dormitories, class-rooms, and workshops, connected by covered sidewalks.

Besides netting, which is a pleasant and profitable occupation as a sort of side issue, we teach at St. Dunstan's four handicrafts, and many of the blinded soldiers, not content with one, master two. The four trades are mat-making, basket-making, boot-repairing, and joinery.

Seeing hundreds of men busily at work making things, talking together, and often whistling and singing—the "Cobblers'

Chorus," marked by the beat of the hammers, became so overpowering that it had to be kindly but firmly suppressed—visitors can hardly believe that they are blind, and many of them mere beginners at their work. It is in sober truth a wonderful and impressive scene. A high standard of perfection is set, for the blind men, when they leave us to start business for themselves, have to meet open competition. People would soon get tired of patronizing a blind cobbler, for instance, whose work was not as good as that of any other boot-repairer's in the same neighborhood.

In their leisure hours the blinded soldiers go out for walks and attend all sorts of entertainments, such as concerts and theatrical performances. Some plays, of course, are much more easily followed than others, but in general the blind enjoy the theater in a way that sighted people would hardly suppose to be possible.

Mingling in this manner in the ordinary life of the community, much of the sense of isolation that blindness brings is lost. Early in the days of St. Dunstan's we inaugurated regular dances, which in summer-time sometimes took place on the lawn. The Guards and other regiments sent their bands, and dancing has continued to be one of the favorite recreations of the blinded soldiers. It is astonishing how well they dance, scarcely requiring any guidance from their lady partners.

The men were encouraged to go out in the pleasure-boats on the lake in Regent's Park lake, and in a short time rowing was taken up very seriously as a recreation. The crews, in sweaters and shorts, went out for early practise before breakfast. A famous amateur coach gave his services. Regattas were held on the Thames, and the blind oarsmen met and defeated sighted crews. Rowing has become a great feature in the life at St. Dunstan's.

Many of the men enjoy swimming. We have physical drill and tugs-of-war. Once a week a sports contest is held. The program includes running, jumping, skipping, climbing the rope, scoring goals with a football against a sighted goal-keeper, relay races, and hundred-yard sprints.

Indoor amusement is found in chess, drafts, dominoes, and cards, which are distinguished by Braille dots at one corner. The men enjoy reading aloud; many of them study music. St. Dunstan's has its own periodical, a debating club, and an excellent little band, which, while the military hospitals were still in full swing in

BLINDED SOLDIERS FEEDING CHICKENS ON THE POULTRY-FARM MAINTAINED BY ST. DUNSTAN'S

London, gave many hours of pleasure to wounded soldiers.

For the blind constant occupation of the mind means happiness. By the time the men are ready to leave St. Dunstan's they have taken big strides back toward normal life. Happily, too, a great number of the unmarried men have found very charming wives; and these girls are not only charming, but more than usually pretty. Many people seemed to think that the blinded soldier in search of a wife would find one of the "left-overs," but this, let me assure the readers of MUNSEY'S, is very far from being the case. With very few exceptions, I have made the acquaintance of the four hundred or so young ladies who have married blinded soldiers. I always ask for a full description before they come into my room, and in a surprising number of cases "such a pretty girl" forms part of that description.

I sincerely hope that before very long all those blinded in the war will have completed their training; but, in addition to the two thousand who came straight to St. Dunstan's, no fewer than twenty-three thousand others were discharged from the army on account of damaged sight. Many of these have since been overtaken by blindness, and it is impossible to say when the need for our class-rooms and workshops will end.

The after-care of the men settled in their new life becomes increasingly the important work of St. Dunstan's. We find them employment and suitable homes; we establish the cobbler in his shop, or the poultry-farmer on his property; we arrange for the provision of all necessary raw materials at wholesale cost price; and if it should prove that there is not a sufficient local market for such articles as baskets and mats, we arrange for their sale.

Experts constantly visit the men to advise them on their work, and generally to help them with their problems. We maintain country and seaside homes for any who still feel the effects of their wounds, or are in need of a change. Through our large staff of regular visitors we keep in the closest touch with them all.

This after-care department is managed by Captain Ian Fraser, the blinded officer

AN ANATOMY CLASS FOR BLINDED SOLDIERS LEARNING MASSAGE, A CALLING IN WHICH GRADUATES OF ST. DUNSTAN'S HAVE SHOWN REMARKABLE SKILL

BLIND WORKERS IN THE BASKET-WEAVING SHOP AT ST. DUNSTAN'S

whom I have mentioned before. He was one of the early arrivals at St. Dunstan's, and after his period of training was finished he expressed a desire to continue working with me. Though he only left school to join the army, he soon showed himself to be the possessor of remarkable business insight and capacity. He manages his large office and traveling staff with very great tact, skill, and competence, and the men whose welfare he supervises trust in him and believe in him as one of themselves.

LETTERS FROM GRATEFUL GRADUATES

Does any one in the world, I wonder, receive so many delightful letters as I do? The post brings me a never-ending stream of them from all parts of the United Kingdom and of the British Empire, telling of lives filled with undreamed-of happiness, and of success truly marvelous, such as has never been won by blinded men before.

I receive letters from professional men who have returned to work hitherto unattempted by the blind; letters from business men who are continuing the direction of important commercial undertakings; letters from craftsmen who are making earnings fully on a par with those of sighted men in the same walks of industry; letters from masseurs who are not only securing for themselves a comfortable competency, but are doing great good to others; letters from poultry-farmers telling of the success with which they are carrying on their little holdings; letters from men who are accomplishing secretarial work, or operating telephone exchanges, with a skill which is scarcely believable. Many of these letters say things about the work of St. Dunstan's which come straight from the hearts of those who have benefited by it, and go straight to the hearts of those who have been privileged to be responsible for its initiation and management.

Often there comes to my mental vision a picture of the writers as I first met them—hopeless, despairing, and unable to imagine that any good thing was left for them in life. And then I see in my mind's eye these happy, resolute, competent men, who, in spite of their handicap, are showing that they can do their fair share in the work of the world. It is a picture of joyous contemplation the like of which can, I think, have been given to few to conjure up.